Dante's Florence

A Walking Tour of Art and Spirituality in Medieval Florence

COMUNE DI FIRENZE

1265-2015 750

Written and researched by Ruth Chester with the collaboration of Lois Haines and Matthew Treherne. *Supported and financed by* the University of Leeds Centre for Dante Studies and the Arts and Humanities Research Council with the participation of the Comune di Firenze. Italian version translated by Andrea Giordani. English translations of the 'Comedy' by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander. *Images supplied by kind permission of* the Polo Museale di Firenze, Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Opera di Santa Croce, Opera di Santa Maria Novella, ASP Firenze Montedomini. *Graphic design by* SocialDesign.

FLORENCE IN THE AGE OF DANTE

This tour will take us into the city of Florence in the time of Dante Alighieri, Italy's national poet and author of the epic poem the *Divine Comedy*. **Dante** lived in Florence from his birth in 1265 until his exile from the city in 1302. During these years, Florence went through a period of intense change which extended into all areas of life: from religion to politics, art to industry, architecture to education. On this tour, we'll be exploring some of the city's most compelling medieval sites, imagining some of the sounds and experiences which filled daily life. We'll look below the city's surface as we go in search of Florence in the age of Dante. Over the thirteenth century Florence's population doubled to around 100,000 people, making it one of the biggest cities in Europe. People flocked to the city from the surrounding agricultural areas to share in its growing prosperity, largely generated by the wool and textile industry which, at its height, employed a third of the city's population. Florence's urban geography was undergoing dramatic transformation. A new city wall, begun in 1284 and still visible today in six city gates and stretches in the Oltrano, outlined the massive extent of the city's growth. Although the city was expanding, its focal point remained between the political centre of Piazza Signoria and the religious centre of Piazza del Duomo. The late thirteenth century saw the construction of many of the buildings we now consider icons of Florence: the Duomo of Santa Maria del Fiore, Santa Croce, the Palazzo Vecchio. This building boom was made possible by the new-found wealth of Florence's merchant bourgeois class which formed themselves into guilds (Arte in Italian). Florence's most powerful guilds were those representing textile making (calimala), wool working (lana) and money exchange (cambio). You will still find the symbols of these guilds stamped on the city's buildings. Florence soon became synonymous with financial power and wealth, and in the thirteenth century its official coin, the Florin, became the international currency of choice. The growth of the merchant class also affected political life. Florence was already a republic, but in 1282 a new structure of government was formed which gave power exclusively to the major city guilds. The leaders of the city or **Priori** could only be elected from amongst guild members, thereby excluding aristocrats and peasants alike. The merchants, with their new-found wealth and power, revelled in beautifying their city to the glory of man and God.

Dante was born into a minor noble Florentine family in 1265. His family were part of the Guelph political faction, those who supported the power of the Pope over that of the Emperor. Dante became involved in politics supporting the White Guelph faction. When the opposing party, the Black Guelphs, took control of Florence in 1301, Dante was exiled from the city. He never returned and died in Ravenna in 1321. Dante is often thought of as the father of the Italian language. In his youth, Dante began to write love poetry which he later collected into a work called the Vita Nuova. He wrote many different kinds of text during his life including works on philosophy, language and politics. His most famous work, the Comedy, describes the journey of the poet through the realms of the Christian afterlife: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven.

Alongside these social and political transformations, intellectual and cultural life in Florence was transformed by a revolution in everyday religious experience. Although the most famous of the mendicant monastic orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, were only established in the early thirteenth century, by Dante's day they had spread throughout Europe. Mendicants offered a new way of living the Christian experience which focused upon engaging individual believers and teaching them how to work towards their own salvation. This attitude brought about transformations in education, preaching, religious practice, art and architecture. While in earlier times monasteries had been set up in isolated areas away from cities to facilitate contemplation, mendicant houses were now established in the heart of the growing urban areas of Europe. Order members, forbidden from holding private property and dependent on the charity of others for their daily needs, flourished best in the rich new cities. More importantly, being in the cities enabled the friars to work in the community, spreading the word of God and following the teaching and life of Christ and the apostles. The mendicant orders became extremely important in Dante's Florence. During our tour we will visit two of the new churches constructed for the mendicants in this period: Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce. The mendicant orders left their physical mark on the city of Florence, not least in the large piazze which we find outside of the city's major churches. These piazze were constructed to accommodate the huge crowds who would gather to listen to the preaching of the mendicant friars. As today, thirteenth century Florence would have been a bustling, noisy place: the omnipresent sound of building works; bells ringing out hourly from the city's many churches

Dante was one of the Priori of Florence. He enrolled in the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries in order to be able to participate in city politics.

In the Comedy, Dante, instead of giving the city's name, describes Florence as 'the sheepfold of St John' (Paradiso, XVI,25). He refers to the Baptistery itself, calling it 'my beautiful San Giovanni' (Inferno XIX,17). In the Comedy there is a close connection between the Baptistery of Florence and Dante's own sense of identity; In looking to the future, when the exiled poet hopes to return to his home city, he wishes that 'with another veil I shall return as poet and, at the font where I was baptized, I will take my crown.' (Paradiso XXV, 7-9)

1 BAPTISTERY

Our tour begins in the religious and communal heart of Dante's Florence: the **Baptistery of San Giovanni**. Replacing a more ancient temple, this magnificent romanesque building has stood – largely unaltered – on this site since the middle of the eleventh century. Dedicated to the patron saint of the city, St John the Baptist, this building was central to the city's sense of identity in the late thirteenth century. Entering the Baptistery, the striking golden mosaics of the ceiling show us thirteenth century visions of Heaven and Hell, visions which Dante himself explores in the *Comedy*. Also depicted are the lives of Christ and John the Baptist, and stories from the book of Genesis. Images of biblical stories were an essential form of education at a time when many people could not read. The clear stories of the ceiling are contrasted by the floor's abstract patterns which appear in the black, white and green marble typical of Florentine architecture of this period. Within the dense patterns you can also see a zodiac. As we stand in the middle of the Baptistery, we are surrounded by a medieval Christian vision of Heaven and Earth. Baptism is the sacramental ritual by which original sin is washed away and a person enters the community of the Church. In Dante's day both adults and children would be fully immersed in the waters of the font. The majority of Florence's populace, including Dante, would have been baptised in San Giovanni, this tradition carrying on into the mid-twentieth century.

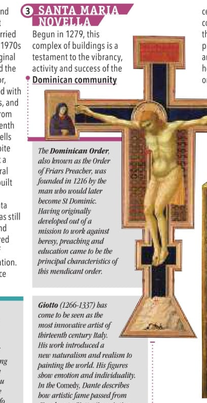
2 SANTA REPARATA

Construction was started on Florence's most iconic building, the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo), around 1296 under the guidance of architect **Arnolfo di Cambio**. However, the cathedral which Dante and his fellow Florentines would have known is the much older Santa Reparata, founded around the sixth century. Saint Reparata was a third century Christian virgin martyr from Caesarea in modern day Palestine, whose cult became popular in France and Italy and who became one of the co-patron saints of Florence. To discover the old cathedral of Santa Reparata, enter the modern Duomo and descend into its crypt where excavations carried out in the 1960s and 1970s have revealed the original cathedral. We find the remains of a floor, highly decorated with Roman mosaics, and wall frescoes from the late thirteenth century. This tells us that, despite the fact that a new cathedral was being built around it, the old Santa Reparata was still in use and considered worthy of beautification. This space gives us a sense of the layers of Florence's history, from its Roman origins, to its early Christian development, to the artistic and architectural flourishing of the late thirteenth century. In this intimate and quiet space, we can feel closer to the religious experience of Dante and his contemporaries.

Arnolfo di Cambio (1240-c.1310) was one of the most important architects and sculptors of his age. He was responsible for the design of some of the city's most exciting new buildings including the Duomo and Santa Croce. You can see the sculptures for the original façade which Arnolfo designed in the Museo del Opera del Duomo

3 SANTA MARIA NOVELLA

Begun in 1279, this complex of buildings is a testament to the vibrancy, activity and success of the **Dominican community** central part of their urban community. The friars dedicated their lives to God not only in prayer but as preachers, architects, builders, singers, healers and teachers. The college or Studium at Santa Maria Novella became one of the most important centres of theological and philosophical learning in Europe. Preaching was central to the Dominican mission. Popular Dominican preachers would speak to crowds filling the vast interior of the Church but also to crowds who flocked into the huge piazza outside. They drew on stories from the Bible, examples from nature and scenes from everyday Florentine life. The Dominican mission to communicate the Christian faith also became the impetus for the creation of some of the most important works of thirteenth century art in Florence, including the *Crucifix* by **Giotto** still visible in the basilica today and the *Ruccelai Madonna* by Duccio, created for the Laudesi confraternity at Santa Maria Novella but now housed in the Uffizi Galleries. Confraternities were made up of people who committed themselves to regular devotional activities, but who did not live the cloistered life of monks and nuns. They could have families and be involved in commercial activities. They used their wealth to support and beautify their places of worship, as is the case at Santa Maria Novella. In Dante's Florence. It comprised not only the beautiful basilica of Santa Maria Novella but also a convent, a college and a hostel. Unlike their earlier monastic brothers who lived in rural isolation, the Dominicans were a



The Dominican Order, also known as the Order of Friars Preacher, was founded in 1216 by the man who would later become St Dominic. Having originally developed out of a mission to work against heresy, preaching and education came to be the principal characteristics of this mendicant order.

Giotto (1266-1337) has come to be seen as the most innovative artist of thirteenth century Italy. His work introduced a new naturalism and realism to painting the world. His figures show emotion and individuality. In the Comedy, Dante describes how artistic fame passed from Cimabue to Giotto: 'In painting Cimabue thought he held the field / but now it's Giotto has the cry, / so that the other's fame is dimmed.' (Purgatorio XI,94-96).

*In the frescoes of the **Cappellone Spagnoli** or Spanish Chapel in the cloisters of Santa Maria Novella, we can see an image from the 1360s of the beliefs and activities of the Dominican order in Florence. The grandeur and detail of these images demonstrate the power and influence the order had acquired within the life of the city*

4 OGNISSANTI

Ognissanti (All Saints), significantly altered in the baroque period, was a vital witness to the changing religious currents of the thirteenth century. Ognissanti was taken over in the early 1250s by the Umiliati, a religious order which, in the eyes of the established Church, stood right on the border between acceptable spiritual fervour and dangerous heresy. The group had three levels of adherents: those who followed the community's rules but lived outside the cloister, continuing to marry and be involved in trade; those who lived within the closed community; and the first order of priests and clerics. The Umiliati, focused on poverty, work and spreading the word of God, demonstrate the growing importance of individual spirituality and commitment in the religious practice of this period. The Umiliati were most noted as wool workers and they were invited to take over and regenerate Ognissanti through their religious and commercial activities. Running water was essential to wool production and Ognissanti, sitting on the banks of the Arno, was transformed by the Umiliati into a centre for wool working, taking advantage of the natural islets and canals created by the then confluence of the rivers Arno and Mugnione. The commercial success of the Umiliati meant they could commission new art and Ognissanti became home to some of the most important and prestigious artworks from the period, including the beautiful **Ognissanti Madonna** by Giotto (now housed in the Uffizi) and a crucifix from the Giotto school still visible in the church today.

5 SANTA TRINITA

Santa Trinita is a perfect place to view the layers of Florence's history. Its sixteenth century façade gives way to a high arched gothic interior constructed in the fourteenth century. Once inside the church and facing the entrance, we can glimpse the original plain stone internal façade dating from the building's first construction in the eleventh century. This original building witnessed many of the social, religious, political and artistic transformations of thirteenth century Florence. Santa Trinita was home to the powerful Vallombrosian monastic order and around 1175 the church became an abbey and was granted control of the new Santa Trinita bridge (the forerunner of that which stands today). It used its power and wealth to build accommodation for pilgrims and the poor in this area of the city. The church's prestige is evident in its art work which included the **Maestà altar piece** by Cimabue (now in the Uffizi Gallery) which would probably have stood on the high altar, visible to the faithful. In the fifteenth century **frescoes by Ghirlandaio** which adorn the chapel to the right of the high altar and depict the life of St Francis of Assisi, we can see an image of what Santa Trinita and its district looked like in the early thirteenth century. The church's façade appears, plain and small, to the right of the image, with its circular window and rows of decorative arches, and a group of monks stand outside it. In the distance we can see the original Santa Trinita bridge while a large piazza stands in front of the church.

Cimabue (1240-1302) was one of the foremost artists in Florence in the later thirteenth century. Cimabue began to move away from the stylised forms typical of earlier Byzantine art and made his human figures more natural

Santa Trinita hosted important political meetings between the city's warring factions, the Guelphs and Ghibellines, and later the White and Black Guelphs. One such meeting in 1301 led to Dante's own exile from the city of Florence.

6 SANTI APOSTOLI

This beautiful church takes us directly to the daily religious scenes of Dante's Florence. The Romanesque building was founded in the mid-eleventh century and maintains its unadorned original façade and, inside, the rounded arches and flat wooden roof typical of the period. Santi Apostoli, unlike the other monastic complexes we have visited, was the parish church for its community. The church stands in **Piazza del Limbo** which was originally used as a cemetery for infants who, having died before baptism, were believed to reside in Limbo in the afterlife. Dante creates an image of what Limbo might be like in the *Comedy* and this small, quiet piazza, a place of peace and melancholy, captures something of his poetic vision.

Dante imagines Limbo as a place of melancholy rather than suffering. 'Here, as far as I could tell by listening, / was no lamentation other than the sighs / that kept the air forever trembling, / These came from grief without torment / borne by vast crowds / of men, and women, and little children.' (Inferno IV, 25-30). He creates a radical idea of Limbo as a place for not only the unbaptised babies and Biblical patriarchs of tradition, but also good pagans who lived virtuously without Christian faith

7 ORSANMICHELE

The present-day church of Orsanmichele illustrates the intermingling of secular and sacred life in Dante's Florence. The original church of San Michele in Orto, which had existed on this site since the ninth century, was replaced in the 1280s by a grain market constructed by Arnolfo di Cambio. On a pillar of the grain market loggia was an image of the Virgin Mary which soon attracted a devotional cult. A Laudesi confraternity was established at Orsanmichele and had the responsibility of worshipping and caring for the miraculous icon. Laudesi, taken from the Latin word laude referring to songs of praise, were groups of ordinary people who wanted to live a more active spiritual and devotional life. Each evening songs would be sung in front of the miraculous image; at special masses, devotees would stand round the image holding candles and worshippers might place wax statues of deceased loved ones before the shrine. While the building we see here today is a later construction of the 1330s, and the original image of the Madonna is replaced by a **Madonna and Child** painted by Bernardo Daddi around 1346, we can still see in this building the coming together of devotional and commercial. The internal structure of the existing church, with vaulted columns running down the centre of the building, shows its origins as a covered market. In the columns, adorned with frescoes showing figures from the Bible, you can see the holes through which grain would have been sent down from the storage rooms above.

Giovanni Villani was a fourteenth century Florentine chronicler. He wrote this about the transformation of the Virgin's cult at Orsanmichele: 'In that year [1292] on the 3rd of July, there began to be manifested great and obvious miracles in the city of Florence by a figure of the Virgin Mary painted on a plaster of the loggia of Orto San Michele, where the grain is sold … [...] out of custom and devotion, a number of laity sang laude before this figure, and the fame of these miracles [...] so increased that people came from all over Tuscany in pilgrimage'.

In the Comedy, Dante imagines a similar scene in which a group of souls gather together to sing: 'a soul … lifted his clasped palms and fixed his eyes / upon the east as if he said to God: / "For nothing else do I have any care".' Te lucis ante came forth from his lips / with such devotion and notes so sweet' (Purgatorio VIII,8-14).

8 QUARTIERE DANTESCO

Leaving Orsanmichele and walking down Via Dante Alighieri, you pass through what has come to be known as the Dantean quarter of the city. While little direct evidence is available to us, it is possible that Dante lived in this area of the city. The Church of Santa Margherita dei Cerchi houses the tomb of the beloved of whom Dante writes in his *Comedy*: Beatrice Portinari. In the nineteenth century a replica of a medieval town house was built, now known as the Casa di Dante. In this area you can also see an excellent authentic medieval example of a casa torre or tower house. The Torre dei Cerchi is situated between Corso and Via dei Cerchi. These buildings, somewhere between dwellings and fortifications, were a typical structure of a period marked by internecine wars.

Next to Orsanmichele you can see the Palazzo dell'Arte della Lana, a palace belonging to the Wool Workers guild completed in 1308. This building now houses the Società Dantesca or Dante Society in Florence. Through this building you can also gain access to the Museum of Orsanmichele which houses the originals of the statues which adorn Orsanmichele's exterior.

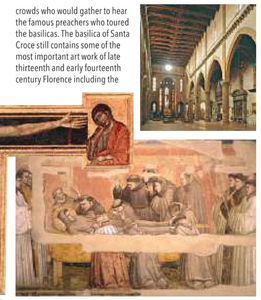
9 BADIA FIORENTINA

The Badia Fiorentina was founded in the late tenth century and belonged to the powerful Benedictine monastic order. The oldest abbey in Florence, the Badia was a centre of religious, political and commercial activity, and, before the construction of Palazzo della Signoria, hosted the meetings of the Priori and the magistrates of the Republic of Florence. The abbey owned much of the surrounding commercial property and profited from the paper and book production industry concentrated in this quarter of the city. The Badia underwent dramatic reconstruction in the 1280s under the direction of Arnolfo di Cambio who transformed the Romanesque building into a Gothic church. Like other sites on our tour, the Badia was later renovated giving it its present Baroque style. The original plain brown stone façade is still visible on Via Proconsolo.

While we cannot be sure what Dante would have seen of the new basilica, characteristic elements of its structure appear to creep into Dante's own poem. As you walk around the basilica you will notice many sculpted gravestones set into the church floor, often showing a portrait of the person within. Dante recreates a similar experience in his Purgatory: 'As gravestones set above the buried dead / bear witness to what once they were, / their carven images recalling them to mind / making us grieve with frequent tears' (Purg. XII. 16-19).

10 SANTA CROCE

Unlike the Baptistery and Santi Apostoli, which represent earlier religious architecture and practices with which a florentine like Dante would have grown up, the churches of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce were built around the new ideas which characterized the Franciscan Order, its open space designed to facilitate communication between clerics and the faithful, and its flat walls providing ample space for educational frescoes. The large area inside and outside the church accommodated the vast crowds who would gather to hear the famous preachers who toured the basilicas. The basilica of Santa Croce still contains some of the most important art work of late thirteenth and early fourteenth century Florence including the **Cimabue Crucifix** and frescoes by Giotto in the Bardi and Peruzzi chapels showing scenes from the lives of St Francis, St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist.



*The **Franciscan order** was begun by St Francis of Assisi and was institutionalised by the pope in 1223. St Francis became known for his intense adherence to poverty. Stories which emerged during and after the saint's life tell us that in 1224, following a period of intense prayer on mount La Verna in Tuscany, Francis received the stigmata, the wounds which Christ suffered at his crucifixion. Because of this and his adherence to the apostolic way of life, Francis came to be revered as a second Christ, as a man whose devotion and love had literally transformed him into the object of that love. In keeping with this, Franciscan devotion was typified by intense spiritual focus and emotional engagement.*

Santa Croce is now home to the tombs and monuments of some of Florence's greatest citizens. Although Dante's body is buried in Ravenna, here in Santa Croce an empty monument to the poet 'honours him in his native city.

11 SAN MINIATO

The church of San Miniato gives us one of the fullest insights into the kind of church Dante would have known. Constructed between 1018 and 1207, much of the decoration inside the basilica which we see today also dates from around this period, with only some Renaissance additions. The church is dedicated to Saint Minias, a third century Christian martyr who died in Florence and whose remains are housed in this church. The church contains characteristic examples of Romanesque and early Gothic architecture; the walls and façade lined with polychrome marble inlay, the floor laid out in intricate and mysterious patterns, including a Zodiac, and the more ancient crypt where the monks still gather today for Vespers. One of the church's most striking elements is the golden mosaic which fills the ceiling above the altar and depicts Christ, the Virgin Mary and St Minias in a garden of birds. We climb up to the church following the via crucis, a steep way lined with crosses recalling Christ's walk to his crucifixion. Reaching the top of the hill on which the church stands we are treated to a magnificent view over Florence. On entering San Miniato's dark and quiet interior after the exertion of the climb, we can get a sense of the relief and peace medieval worshippers might have had on entering this sacrturary.

In the Comedy, Dante compares climbing Mount Purgatory to climbing the hill up to San Miniato: 'Just as, to climb the hillside where the church is set / which, over Rubaconte, dominates / the justly governed city, there on the right / the sheer slope of the steep ascent is cut / by stairs that were constructed in a time / when registers and measures could be trusted' (Purgatorio XII. 100-105).